

California Water Conditions Synopsis for January 2003

For the second year in a row California has seen a good head start to the water year fade during January. Over half of the rainy season is past. As of now, forecasts call for a subnormal water year overall, but not drought, with wetter conditions in the north, drier in the south, and still with a large range in possible outcomes. Much above average winter temperatures and liberal rain in the northern end of the state have boosted reservoir storage ahead of last year.

Precipitation from October 1 through January 31 was 110 percent of average compared to 100 percent last year. Again southern California percentages are low while the north coast region is well above average. December had 200 percent of average, but January precipitation was only 45 percent, with less than an inch in the southern Sierra.

Snowpack water content was 100 percent of average on February 1 compared to 120 percent last year. At the end of December, the pack was 160 percent of average, but lack of accumulation during January and warm weather at middle elevations erased the advantage. The pack is about 65 percent of the April 1 average, which is the normal date of maximum accumulation. The warm January weather has increased the chance of early snowmelt this spring.

Runoff from the December storms raised several reservoirs to flood control status and weir overflow into the Sacramento Valley bypass floodway system occurred during much of January. Total runoff so far this season is above average at 120 percent compared to 100 percent last year.

Forecasts of April through July runoff, assuming normal weather for the remainder of the season, are below average at 85 percent overall. Water year forecasts, which include the high December flows, are 95 percent of average. The runoff forecasts are highest in northern basins. As of February 1, the forecasted Sacramento River Index (SRI) was 99 percent of average, the Sacramento Valley Index (40-30-30) year type was above normal, and the San Joaquin Valley Index (60-20-20 SJI) year type was below normal.

Reservoir storage overall was 100 percent of average for this date, the same as last year. The reservoirs in the north contain more than one year ago, those to the south and the east side of the Sierra contain less. Storage in most major reservoirs remains well below winter flood control limits.